Question and Answer

Distribute 11-5-15

Q. We have oriental hibiscus for the first time this year and we love them. We understand that they are cold sensitive? What does that mean exactly?

A. It means that about Thanksgiving (sooner if a freeze is forecast) the oriental hibiscus need to be moved to a site such as a sun porch or greenhouse where light is available and temps never fall below freezing. Some gardeners have an alternate arrangement where they put them in a shelter location close to the house and cover them with a blanket or fabric when freezes are forecast. They need both light and protection from cold in the winter.

Q. What do people use kumquats for? Our new home has a kumquat loaded with fruit in the middle of the yard. The tree is 7 feet tall and loaded with fruit. They taste okay but are not as good as satsumas.

A. Gardeners eat them fresh, peeling and all, and they use them in all types of preserves and candied dishes. The trees are attractive landscape features. They are less cold sensitive than satsumas. One option on extra fruit may be to work out a deal with your local food bank to distribute any extras.

Q. It is amazing that with the rain we received the last few weeks our St Augustine grass greened up! It is not growing like it does in the spring but looks good. How low should we mow it? Is it too late to fertilize? How about any other attention?

A. Mow St Augustine grass 3 inches high. Yes the lawn will still benefit by a fertilizer application. Use a fertilizer labeled “winterizer”. Common formulas include 18-6-12 and 15-5-10. The fall fertilization contributes to winter hardiness and fast spring green-up. Another practice that benefits the lawn is to aerate and top-dress with compost. Visit plantanswers.com for the specifics of aeration and top dressing. It is easy and works wonders on the lawn.

Q. Awhile back you suggested that those of us that planted tropical milkweed for the Monarchs should prune it back to the ground now. Remind us why?

A. In an attempt to provide nectar sources and egg-laying sites for declining Monarch populations, hundreds of gardeners planted tropical milkweed. Some naturalist worry that the plant’s tendency to stay green all winter may encourage Monarchs to change their migration patterns. The plants may also accumulate increased levels of a microbe that affects Monarchs. Until the research is completed it is best to prune tropical milkweed to the ground. It will resprout in the spring.

Q. What is the easiest green to grow? I have limited space in the garden.

A. Swiss chard, kale and collards are the easiest for me to grow. Swiss chard produces over the longest season.